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A Simcoe Relic

Among the Thousand Isles in 1796.

Fragment of a MS. Journal of Mrs. Simcoe

Edited by

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A SIMCOE RELIC.

EDITED BY REV. H. SCADDING, D.D.

Copy of short journal contained in a letter addressed by Mrs. Simcoe to her husband, the Lieutenant-Governor, in 1796, when on her way in a covered boat from Kingston to Montreal and Quebec.

Mrs. Jameson in her well-known work "Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada," informs us that for "performing the bold feat of descending the rapids of the Sault Ste. Marie in a canoe, she received the Otchipway name Wah-sah-ge-wah-no-qua—the woman of the bright foam, by which title she was afterwards known among the Chippewas."

This was in 1837.

Many years previously, viz., in 1796, a lady in Canada earned without receiving a title like this, for a similar but much more audacious exploit, by the descent in an ordinary bateau of the rapids of the River St. Lawrence, from Kingston to Cornwall, and thence onward to Montreal and Quebec. These are the same swift and turbulent waters that drew from the poet Moore, whose fortune it was to traverse them in 1806, his graphic allusions to "Cadaraqui's lordly tide" as it flows through "mossy woods, through islets flowering fair," on which occasion also he rescued from obscurity and made popular for ever amongst us the air and words of the "Canadian Boat Song."

The "woman of the bright foam" who so bravely performed the descent of the St. Lawrence in a small boat was, in this instance, the wife of the first Lieutenant-Governor of the Province, Mrs. Simcoe, of whom the Duke de Liancourt, in his published Travels in America, spoke so admiringly, as rendering such valuable assistance to her husband in the execution of his duties.

Mr. D. B. Read, in his Life and Times of Governor Simcoe, page 138, observes of her that she "could draw and paint well, was a good maker of maps, and was an accomplished and accurate artist." Some proofs of the last mentioned fact are to be found in a journal which I possess, kept during this very descent of the waters of the St. Lawrence in 1796, the text of the Journal being interspersed here and there with slight sketches of objects in the surrounding scenery.

As this Journal must possess an interest for persons who concern themselves in our Canadian past I here transcribe it, regretting that after all it is but fragmentary.

The lady appears to have been sent forward with the expectation that the Governor and his suite would follow in due time, *en route* to Quebec for his final departure from Canada. The Journal is in fact a letter to her husband giving an account of her progress from day to day as far as Cornwall, whence the document seems to have been sent back to York or Niagara by a returning messenger. The next letter, were

we so fortunate as to possess it, would be of equal interest, but the Journal here presented is, as I have said, simply a fragment. It is closely written on a rough-edged, old-fashioned sheet of foolscap, folded into small octavo bookshape. It will be seen that the writer had an observant eye and was ready to collect facts and statistics, a habit probably acquired while acting as a kind of private secretary to her husband. Thus, for instance, she gathers from a person at whose house she lodged for a night, that between the Gananoque and the Rideau there is a portage of only half a mile, and that the distance to the Grand River [*i.e.*, the modern Ottawa] was between 50 or 60 miles. She notes that flour is brought to this spot from the Bay of Quinté; that a vessel lately built hereabout could carry 120 barrels. She reports that a certain disloyal settler from the United States has been building a sawmill on the opposite side of the St. Lawrence within sight of Johnstown, and that timber sawn there might, it is feared, be utilized for constructing rafts with a view to hostile incursions on the country at some future time. Like the Poet Moore she questioned the French voyageurs as to the songs with which they beguiled the monotony of their daily tasks and induced an old man in her own bateau to sing "Les trois d'un Prin e," which I fail to find in the collection which Ernest Gagnon has made of such productions, published at Quebec in 1865, or in Le Reith Chansonié, printed in Montreal in 1862.

The Journal commenced at Kingston, September 15th, 1796.

Mrs. Simcoe appears to have been conducted to Kingston in one of the Government vessels under the command of Captain Bouchette, in regard to whom we have a separate memorandum at the foot of the first page of the Journal. She says: "Captain Bouchette wanted to refuse the 15 guineas, he said it was too much; I believe he was very well satisfied." We are also told that "Miss McDonell, Miss Bouchette, Capt. Porter and Mr. Salmon came on board." The Journal itself opens as follows:—

Monday, September 15th—Left Kingston at half past twelve in a boat with a comfortable awning of hoops and oilcloth, accompanied by another bateau with baggage; a fine strong wind, delightful sailing. At four the wind came on hard and we were obliged to row. In half an hour after we left Kingston it began to rain hard and continued the whole night. Carey's house shut up, as he had gone to Kingston; rained too hard for me to pitch the tent or sleep in the bateau; slept at Fairfield's house close by the mill at Gananoque, he is the farmer's son who built a small vessel; she is now gone for a load of flour to the Bay of Quinté; I think I saw her in the harbour of Kingston, she has carried 120 barrels, looks much larger than the *Tiandinsga*. McGill stayed in the bateau. Fairfield said he had been 35 miles back from his present house to catch white fish, but having no means but spearing, and they are remarkably swift and difficult to spear, he took but twenty-three, was out two nights. The land at Gananoque is very bad, barren and fit for nothing, but half a mile back becomes very good.

September 16th—A very wet morning after a night of incessant rain. The *Canadian* would not stir, so I waited to breakfast. Mr. Stone, who is building a mill opposite Fairfield's, came and was extremely civil, brought butter and milk. About nine the rain ceased. I walked

to look at the mill and embarked; gave a dollar to the people, Mr. McGill said Stone was too much of a gentleman to offer anything to. The saw mill he is building is to have 15 saws. He says there is a portage of only half a mile from the Gananoque to the Rideau, the Indians carry over it; that it is 50 or 60 miles to the Grand River; he said the hill behind Fairfield's house is the highest ground anywhere about in the country, the land descending from it every way. Fairfield said there is a fall 30 miles up the Gananoque 30 feet high, and many slight rapids.

[In the township of Ernestown and elsewhere in Canada many Fairfields were to be found, descendants of a U. E. Loyalist stock. [The Mr. Stone here mentioned was probably Mr. Joel Stone, also a U. E. Loyalist, originally settled in the province of Connecticut.]

About twelve the day grew fine and pleasant. Our Canadians are old and do not sing; however I made them sing "Trois filles d'un Prince," though indifferently. Captain Foster said to Mr. McGill the *Sophia* might be two months in one trip to Oswegatchis. In the afternoon got on to Captain Cowal's just opposite Point Oswegatchis, an admirable large room, six large windows in it twelve feet high. Captain Cowal spoke much of the weakness and unprovided state of the inhabitants in case of war with the States; he particularly mentioned as dangerous the circumstance of settlers, who call themselves residents under the King's government, but some whose loyalty is doubtful, building sawmills on the opposite shore. One Noneguell in particular, who had been a notorious rebel, and since his residence under the King's government was once confined at Kingston for improper behaviour, this man has a saw mill directly opposite this house, with many thousand boards cut. Mr. Cowal says these saw mills afford ample provision for rafts on which the Americans might pass over and ravage this country. A well known road through the woods from Oswegatchis to Crown Point or Lake George is so passable that 30 or 40 head of cattle pass with ease in eight days.

Wednesday, 17th—Embarked at six. Fine wind, showery. Passing first rapid at Gallop, very frightful. A little below Johnstown saw a deer and a canoe trying to overtake it; the deer swam to the shore and got ashore. Half past nine, passed Point Cardinal and Rapid Platt 20 mile. Half after three, Mr. McGill wanted to give a message from you to the Speaker, so we stopped for him to deliver it; and I take the opportunity of sending this book that you may know we got safe and well so far and had a pleasant journey.

May give this book to Mr. D. W. Smith to send back to me immediately, for I mean to make some pretty drawings from these rough sketches.

I should not have sent you this rough one but that I know you will be glad to know myself and the children are as well and as comfortable as is possible to be any where in your absence.

We have had a good deal of thunder and rain to-day. A thunder storm was hardly passed when we entered the Long Sault. Had it continued what a fine war of elements. The Long Sault is less alarming than I expected, but very grand and fine, and nothing but reason would keep me from being afraid. Your sight must be terrified though knowledge makes you rest satisfied.

She adds as a postscript:—

The going down the river is so fine a thing altogether I wish for you every moment. I should be in ecstacies if you were here to partake of them.

The sketches interspersed in the Journal are the following:

1. Carey's House.
2. View from Fairfield's house, where I slept, near the mill on Gananoque River.
3. Large view of Fairfield's house.
4. Lesser view of Fairfield's house.
5. Isle Fort Levy.
6. Point Iroquois.
7. One mile below Point Iroquois.
8. Captain Munro's house and mill.

These, it will be seen, were to be examined by Mr. D. W. Smith, the then Surveyor-General of the province, and speedily returned.

In the first volume of the second series of Charles Knight's Penny Magazine are to be seen outline sketches of Kingston, Upper Canada, by Mrs. Simcoe, possibly taken during this descent of the river. For these outlines access may have been had to a very curious collection of early Upper Canada views, drawn by Mrs. Simcoe in colors on birch bark, now in the Library of the British Museum. It was a kind of album prepared for presentation to King George the Third.

It will not be an unfitting supplement to the Journal to add here the brief summary given by D. W. Smith, in his short topographical description of Upper Canada, 1799, of the small islands and isolated rocks in front of the several townships along Mrs. Simcoe's route down the river. It will give some idea of the intricacies and consequent perils of the route. The enumeration is from east to west, the reverse of the order observed in the Journal, and we are taken through the famous Thousand Islands—Les Milles Isles, as the French styled them.

"The township of Cornwall. Two branches of the River aux Raisins pass through the lands of this township, and in the front thereof are the Isles aux Mille Roches, et des Chenaux Ecartées, Grand Isle, Point Regis in front of the town of Cornwall itself.

"The township of Osnabruck lies above Cornwall, the River aux Raisins rises here in several branches; it has two other streams which run into the St. Lawrence in front, off which lies the Isle au Longue Sault, Isle de trois Chenaux Ecartées, Isles au Diable, et Isle au Chat. The rapid called the Long Sault lies in front of this township. * * *

"The township of Williamsburgh is next above Osnabruck, it has but few streams; there are some islands in its front, among the rest Isle au Rapid Plat, the west end of which lies also in front of Matilda, the next township. In the front is Point aux Pins and Point Iroquois, the latter of which has the advantage in a great measure of commanding the passage up and down the St. Lawrence. A few islands lie in the front of this township, and a peninsula which is insulated at high water.

"Edwardsburgh is the next township; in the front part of which is Johnstown of a mile square. This, with the town of Cornwall has been judiciously seated, the one being immediately above, the other below

the rapids of the upper St. Lawrence, and of course easy of access from the lake St. Francis below to Cornwall, and from Johnstown vessels may be navigated with safety to Queenston, above Niagara, and to all the ports of the Lake Ontario. In the front of this township is Pointe au Cardinal, Pointe Iroquois and Pointe au Foin, and several islands, among which are Hôspital Island and Isle du Fort Levy, where the French had a garrison, the ruins of which are still to be seen. A little above Johnstown on the south shore is Fort Osweigatchie, situated on a river of that name.

"Augusta lies above Edwardsburgh, it has but few streams; Pointe au Barril is in front.

"The next township is Elizabeth Town, which is well watered by the river Tonianta and three other streams. The Isles du Barril lie in front of this township.

"The township of Yonge lies next, is of irregular shape. The river Tonianta empties itself into the St. Lawrence near the south-east angle of this township. Towards the upper part are the narrows made by a peninsula from the north shore and Grenadier island, which lies in front of this township, as do several smaller ones.

"Lansdown is next, it has several small streams and many islands in its front, but none of any size.

"Leeds adjoins Lansdown and is well watered by the river Gananoque, which affords a good harbor at its entrance."

We have in the province of Ontario to this day a reminder of the clever and courageous lady, whose Journal we have been transcribing, in the township of Gwillimbury, Gwillim having been her maiden name In the Register and Magazine of Biography for 1869, vol. 2, p. 69, we are informed that General Simcoe married Elizabeth Posthuma, daughter and sole heiress of Colonel Gwillim, of Alecourt, aide-de-camp to General Wolfe, and killed at his side during the siege of Quebec. The Gwillims, we learn from the same authority, "trace their descent to the unconquered Welsh kings in the time of William the Conqueror."